

## **Blessed Is She**

Luke 1:39-56

The Rev. Dr. David A. Van Dyke

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

December 24, 2017

### The Fourth Sunday in Advent

I believe I've shared with you before that the late Peter Gomes, chaplain at Harvard, used to tell the joke about the Protestant who died and arrived at the Pearly Gates. Jesus opened the door and greeted him saying, "Welcome, come inside. I believe you already know my father but I don't believe you've ever met my mother."

When it comes to Mary, that's how it can be for us Protestants, in our Reformed zeal or fear of all things Catholic. Historically we have tended to avoid Mary like a high school girl with a bad reputation. Now I'm not suggesting that the intention of the reformers was to reduce the importance of her role in the history of salvation. Rather, and like all things Reformed, they were seeking to better understand her in light of scripture, and to temper any excessive devotion some might have been paying to her.

But I would suggest that in our historical shunning of her, we have lost a very deep and rich part of our very own tradition. Consider that no other woman in history has been the focus of so much of the world's great music and art, than has Mary. Add to that her significance, especially now, given the heated and ugly tensions in the way women are treated as well as tensions that exist between the world's major religions.

Many historians see Mary as something of a bridge-builder between other cultures, other traditions and other faiths. She plays the most important role in connecting Christianity with Judaism. As the mother of Jesus, she forever solidifies his identity as a Jew, despite the attempts of some of his early followers to downplay that. She was with Jesus when he was presented in the Temple and again when he returned at age 12.

Mary also provides a bridge to Islam, as one of the most important women in the Quran. The Quran teaches the Virgin Birth and includes stories similar to those in Christianity, such as the annunciation of the angel Gabriel. Some scholars go so far as to argue that Mary occupies a more important role in the Quran than does the Prophet's own mother.

So it could just be that a greater Protestant emphasis on Mary might go a long way in helping us develop a deeper understanding of the whole of the Abrahamic faith tradition.

But also, at a very basic, human level, Mary represents a kind of common woman. She is young, simple and poor. She is vulnerable and frightened. Her situation is sadly, not hard for many to relate to. She is unmarried, pregnant and her much older male companion wasn't much help. She gives birth and raises her child who is later killed. And somehow, in all of that, and as the mother of Jesus, she becomes a symbol of all human suffering and grief.

Standing at the cross as her son dies before her, she becomes a powerful symbol for parents who would do anything to keep their children safe. Especially in that patriarchal, ancient culture, the person of Mary and her role in the whole Christ event, from birth to death and beyond, cannot be, and should not be downplayed.

Just prior to today's reading, the angel Gabriel paid a visit, not to a priest or to some male religious higher up. Instead, the angel visits a young woman who is a virgin. Gabriel announces that she has found favor with God and that she will conceive and give birth to a son, and that she is to name him Jesus.

Mary questions how can this be since she is a virgin. Gabriel tells her that the child to be conceived in her will be from God. And in her startled amazement she famously says, "Here am I, servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

Following that encounter, Mary went running over to the home of another unlikely mother-to-be, Elizabeth. She is married to Zechariah, an old priest and together, they have no children because Elizabeth's womb has been barren and she is now too old. Except, an angel visited Zechariah one day and told him that Elizabeth was going to have a baby. The news rendered him speechless.

When Mary arrived at Elizabeth's house, and greeted her, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. She is already six months along with her son, who will grow up to be John the Baptist. But consider the dynamics in that meeting between Mary and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is old, long married and, until recently, barren. Mary, on the other hand, is young, not married and a virgin. Neither one is a likely mother. But they are both unexpectedly with child. And while finally being pregnant after all those years perhaps removed a societal stigma for Elizabeth, for Mary, being pregnant while unmarried hints at one.

Yet Elizabeth affirms Mary by saying, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." And then what follows this meeting between the two of them is a hymn—this lovely canticle we have come to know as the *Magnificat*, one of the most recognizable pieces of music the world has ever known.

My soul magnifies the Lord  
and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.  
For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
He has shown strength with his arm,  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away, empty.

G.B. Shaw once quipped that it was the most revolutionary song anyone has ever sung. So what are we to make of all this? Of Mary and her visit to Elizabeth? Of their unlikely situations? Of Mary's virgin birth? I don't know, and maybe it's because I'm getting ready to retire, but the elements of this story that for me, used to be so shrouded in mystery, so dependent on the miraculous in order for them be plausible, seem instead, and increasingly so, absolutely plausible and recognizable today.

I mean, it is not at all shocking that a young unattached girl finds herself pregnant and doesn't quite know how it happened. It's not really shocking that a girl who knows she's in trouble would seek solace and refuge *not* from the man she's engaged to—the man whom, given the circumstances was within his legal rights to dismiss her, which is a kinder way of saying dump her, but would instead seek out an old aunt with a story of her own.

And it's not hard to imagine that old auntie taking her in and welcoming her, and assuring her that despite the way everything appears now, things will be ok. She would assure her that she has favor with

God, as does the child she is carrying. And what comforting words those must have been to a frightened young girl, not knowing where else to turn. I pray that every frightened child in this world could have such a place to go.

And isn't that how life works much of the time? Things happen beyond our control. Things unfold beyond our ability to understand them and make sense of them in the moment. And in our shock and dismay, in our moments of profound sadness and regret, our confusion and deep hurt, we find those people to be with who really know us, and who want simply to be there for us. Not because they are going to sing the *Magnificat*, but because their presence says far more profoundly what words never could.

The birth story, and the way it has gotten so fanciful in its retelling, has seemed like a miraculous story that is utterly dependent on divine intervention for it to be comprehended or to make sense. And I wonder if we haven't had it backwards? I wonder if at its core, this birth story is really more of a human story, a common everyday story in the way it is unfolding in all kinds of places, and all over world right now. I wonder if it isn't infused with the same amount of the Spirit's presence as was present in Bethlehem that night?

Because every human story is a mystery, in so many ways. Every human story is both ordinary and miraculous.

Strip away the singing angels and the star in the east, which make far better metaphors than astrological proofs-of-anything, and this is basically a story of a young pregnant girl who is frightened, thinking her life is over and who doesn't know what to do next. And she finds refuge in the company of one who knows, Elizabeth. And Elizabeth assures her that everything will be ok. In fact it will be better than ok because she has God's blessing and favor.

The line that I love from this text is when Elizabeth proclaims, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Blessed is she...blessed is anyone who believes that what God has promised will come to pass.

And think about that for a moment. If this were merely a divine story using human beings as props in the divine drama, then the blessing might be reserved only for those in starring roles. But this is a human story. Meaning that the blessing of God, available to Mary that day, is available to each one of us.

Blessed are those of you who believe that there will be a fulfilling of what the Lord has promised.

Do you believe that the promises of God are true?

Do you believe that light shines in the darkness and that the darkness will not be able to overcome it?  
Then blessed are you.

Do you believe that love is stronger than hate?  
Then blessed are you.

Do you believe that the moral arch of the universe is long and that it always bends toward justice?  
Then blessed are you.

Do you believe that the gospel has the power to change and transform the world?  
Then blessed are you.

Do you find yourself being addressed in the Christmas story? In your fears and your anxious moments? In spite of all the reasons you may have to be discouraged, do you hear in this season's message a word of hope for you? If you believe that the promises of God are true, like gifts, then blessed are you.

Amen.